

2010

The Terminal Question

Kathleen De Azevedo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

De Azevedo, Kathleen (2010) "The Terminal Question," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 72 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss72/14>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

+++
PETER RICHARDS

The feelers say I was taken to bring equilibrium
and the very same need forced them to breathe
me into paintings around the fall of France
surviving mainly on ice and a few figs a day
brought the second stage the two long receding
stripes carried me throughout the paintings I began
to jump controlling the winds and dreaming tall
orange flames pouring over the cities rehearsing
below they say I was only an initial character
guided by six perfected hands and organs working
freely even in death I was led by design past filters
and possible outcomes enriching their circle giving
it shape but also testing the city for its underground
surface had not yet been fully conceived
only partly apprehended it needs a solid agent working
freely YES making Julia's acquaintance but never
on Earth would we have allowed you to plumb
Julia for yourself leaving the city folding her wings
it was beginning the white dot placing its matter

••THE TERMINAL QUESTION

KATHLEEN DE AZEVEDO

I can hear the coydogs howling just outside our trailer court. Well, I don't know if they are coydogs, or not, nor do I know if coydogs really exist, but Chucho and Biggs swear they do, and for the sake of imagination, I like to believe them, though in other circumstances, I wouldn't trust Chucho and Biggs as far as I could throw them. A coydog is a coyote that has bred with a dog. This happens because a dog in its infinite state of heat, wants to screw a wilder form of itself. So you have the wild, mixing with the tame, and getting a confused half-witted mutt. Chucho and Biggs, who unfortunately live in our trailer court, raise dogs to fight. The more independent coyotes typically don't like to fight, unlike rotties or pits, so it stands to reason that a coydog would fight if he had to, but would rather not. People say

Chucho and Biggs are dangerous, but I've gotten used to their mayhem. Their parents are either comatose or buried in the back yard. Chucho and Biggs want to pretend they are fighting some war in which they are in control, but they can't control a thing. The other day, one of the dogs was shot and left on the road. Shows how ignorant they are.

At night, I set up my telescope to keep an eye on the sky: the redness of Mars the god of war, and Orion the hunter constellation. You'd think a hunter and a war god would get violent, thrashing at each other all over the universe, but the blackness traps them in cosmic oil. Our trailer court is far enough away from Reno to see the stars all bright, and when my homework gets meaningless, I study the night sky. Tonight, my little sister was out here with me for awhile, but she got bored just sitting in the cold, and went back inside to watch T.V. "God Gillian," she said, "I thought the desert was boring, but

looking at the sky with you just sucks.”

My brother Scott is in Iraq and he says anyone who wants to see real combat is fucked in the head. In his last email, he wrote and said if he really focused on the reality of war, he couldn’t deal with it. He wrote: I bet YOU couldn’t even deal with it. I don’t care how much you know of the stars and how badly you want to go to the University of Nevada. The instinct is to run FROM danger, but in war, we run TOWARD danger. We become unnatural in that way.

My brother and I always liked to debate the type of important but unreal questions that would be on an essay test. I type: I would run toward danger if I could save someone. Does that make me a freak too?

The next morning I sit in my boring non-AP history class. I begin to imagine what it would be like if this school was blown up in a war, a big explosion throwing the ceiling into sky. Crimson blood footprints. An arm, here. A

leg, there. Several of something. A shank of hair stuck to a piece of bone. A large crying mouth. Jeeps tearing through the sand and crashing into the rubble of desks and blackboards.

We are studying about the Civil War. The blackboard is all with drawings and diagrams, trying to argue a point. Students lolly like zombies, because of course, they are not in AP classes. Most imagine Civil War guns just shot poofs of smoke. They imagine soldiers playing harmonicas and writing Shakespearean letters to wives. The video we watch once in a while mentions a lot of people killed but we don’t need that to impress us so we talk through the whole movie or sleep at our desks. Mr. Matthews calls us “army brats” like we are some kind of race. Mexicans. Blacks. Army Brats. Mr. Matthews is especially annoyed at our la-de-la because our parents are all in some kind of military job, and he says we have to think about what they do. “I know,” he says, “that there are cultural factors

you guys have to deal with. But in a lot of ways, wars are the same.” He’s young and thin and his eyes are round and watery as if he had a pair of glasses implanted on his face. He shudders at his last comment and starts to say something else, but waves his hand. “Never mind.”

Chad leans over to me. With his permanent case of pink eye, he has this cry-baby look. “What is Mr. M. talking about anyway?”

I shake my head heck-if-I know. I’m just an AP geek in a large grey pea coat and so much is in the stars, out of my control. Chad and I don’t even like each other and the only reason he sits by me is because we live in the same trailer court and sometimes I babysit his little brother. Chad dresses in army fatigues that he claims his dad sent to him from Iraq, a green tiger striped camouflage jacket with slanted pockets. I know those green stripe-y things are from Vietnam. My dad was there. If those fatigues were really from Iraq, they’d be tan colored. In truth, Chad

bought his fatigues at Jack Dale’s Army Surplus. Someone cracked about how he looks like those retarded guys from MASH on T.V. but Chad snaps back and says, “these clothes are good for ANY BATTLE. GET IT?”

Chad doesn’t end there. As he gathers his books, he turns to Fatima who sits on the opposite side of him. Fatima is from Iraq like she’s traded places with my brother Scott. She barely speaks English and really should be in ESL. During the whole lecture on the Civil War, her book was open to the chapter on Columbus. She’s kind of short, with dark eyebrows joined together with a furry tuft and she has chopped up black hair like a bad day at Supercuts. She wears corduroy pants and a turtleneck with rosebuds like a junior high kid. I have a hunch there’s a lot going on in her head. Like during class, her face changes expressions for no reason: she’ll grin, then glower, then grimace. It’s like she’s watching a bloody action movie.

At the end of class as we collect our stuff, Chad asks her outright, "You're not American, are you?"

Fatima shrugs and tries to dodge past him. Chad blocks her way. "My dad is over there, where you are from," he continues. "He's been over there for ages. He's been to other places, too and he could kick your ass."

I say, "Chad, shut up! Your dad isn't in Iraq or we'd know. He'd be a hero. Your mom would have a flag hanging in the front of the house."

Chad turns and gives me an evil look because I've made him into a liar. He looks at Fatima, then makes his finger into a gun right at her head. "Pow." Then as we leave, he aims at different people with his finger-gun. "Pow and pow. Try and stop me."

#####

Chad's mother always asks me to babysit his little brother Nick because Chad won't do

it, even though Chad hangs out when I'm there. Nick's after school care ends at five and their mom Mrs. Palmer works until seven at her new job. This particular afternoon, Chad says, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to shoot up the school," and dares me to stop him.

I don't want to believe him. I think about my brother Scott's email where he tells me, "The normal instinct is to run from danger." Chad makes me nervous and I should just quit this babysitting job but I need the money, so I say to myself, "He won't do it. Chad is all talk, ever since I've known him." I let Nick watch X-man cartoons on T.V. Nick has surrounded himself with X-man toys and small plastic army men. Meanwhile, I do my AP math homework on the kitchen table. Chad sits beside me and won't shut up. He tells me his dad just went from one war to another, stopping just long enough to have him, but he found home life so boring, he just kept going to war, from Kuwait, to Bosnia, and

now he's in Iraq. "I can't imagine him not being in the army," Chad says, "it's like he was born in a barracks."

"Doesn't he email you?" I ask, looking up from a scrunchy math problem. "That way you wouldn't have to guess."

Instead of answering, Chad whips into a whole other thing about hanging out with his gun fanatic friend Jerry. Of course, everyone here is a gun fanatic and everyone knows Jerry's got greenish grey horror movie teeth, and his gums have black streaks. His teeth looks like he swallowed a wolverine except for one paw. Jerry's got a normal home, but he also has his meth-shack way off on a dirt road. It smells like a chemistry set out there. My father is a cop and he told me that tweakers are good at hiding stuff. I'm not sure why my dad doesn't arrest him but he says you can't arrest a bad smell. Who knows.

All I know is that Chad starts to blabber about when Jerry and he painted a cow red. Chad

said that Jerry's stepdad was the religious type and told him that when a red heifer was born, it would be the end of the world. So they went out to the pasture and painted this cow so it looked like someone had attacked it with a hatchet. They painted slash-ees on the cow's neck and gut, and painted his ass red too. Then they said, "Behold the red heifer! The end is near!"

Then Chad laughs hysterically, and his brother Nick wanders into the kitchen to check things out. Nick has wet his pants. Chad says, "What's the matter with you pissing your pants? You are fuckin' five years old!"

Nick cries, pissed off. Literally.

I say, "It's ok Nick, we'll just get changed okay?"

But Chad continues on. "What a baby. What a loser. Your father Dexter was a loser."

"No he wasn't," Nick cries.

"Leave him alone." I break in. Dexter was Chad's stepdad for a couple of years. Mrs.

Palmer just has boyfriends now.

"Quit being a bawl baby," Chad continues, ignoring me. "Dexter never loved you. That's why he left. He was just an In-and-Out burger. You loser Nick. Still playing with X-men. What a loser faggot."

I get up and take Nick to the bedroom. But Chad is still ranting in the kitchen: Fuckyou Nick! Fuckyou Dad! Fuckyou chump! Fuckyou Mom, you whore! Fuckyou school and Mr. M. Civil War Nobody and you rest-of-school scum and jerk-off jocks and AP geek Gillian! Zap! And here's to you, Fatima! Rag-head twat! I'll get you first! Terrorist Cunt! Kerplooe! You are a memory in RED! Pow! Zzzzit!

I take Nick into the bedroom and quietly close the door to the bedroom but there is no lock. I pull down Nick's wet pants. He still wears training pants, but his mother has enlarged the side seams with two panels of cloth. His penis looks like the kind of bullets people use to hunt

deer. I try to rush Nick into dry pants. Chad gets crazy but not this crazy. I'm ready to grab Nick and jump out the window. That would be the normal thing. Or I'd just confront Chad and tell him to shut up. That's what my brother would do.

The front door slams and I jump. Nick runs out to the living room before I can put on his pants because he recognizes his mother's footsteps. She yells at him for not having underwear. I come out, waving a clean pair of underwear and for a split second it looks like one of those white flags people wave to stop the shooting. Then I bend down, Nick puts his hand on top of my head for balance, and slips his feet into the leg holes of his underwear. As I get up and gather my homework, Chad sits at the kitchen table as if nothing happened. His mom slips me a small roll of money. "See!" she says to Chad, "she does her homework. She's got a future! Not like someone I know."

I gather my things, slip out quickly and start toward my trailer. I shudder as the cold desert air bites with snapping teeth. I get out my cellphone and call home. I want to make sure someone is there when I arrive.

####

Mr. Matthews has not yet entered the classroom and the noise is deafening with everyone shouting. I am already pissed at him. He wants us to think independently but when I decide to screw the paper on Fort Sumter and write instead on how John Stuart Mill said that a war fought for freedom and justice will strengthen a country, but one fought for patriotism and glory will corrupt it, I get a C with a cheery note written on top: "well-written but not the assignment." He doesn't care that I'm an AP student, sitting here in boring non-AP class. Ulysses S. Grant, the star of the Civil War who said, "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is." That's what I d like to

know. I'm just ready to shake Fatima who is sitting beside me, shuddering, pressing her hands against her ears. "Would you stop," I say to her, "Would you act normal?" So Chad doesn't get weirder than he already is, I want to add.

Fatima shoots a look at me as if I had just burst into her house with a machine gun. Then, she takes a deep breath, folds her hands in front of her, and acts like nothing happened.

But the whole time Chad has been watching us. All of a sudden, he bursts out chattering about how his father fought in many wars and will come back any day now and zap out evil with a single blast. This includes any smart ass that gets in his way. "My dad knows who the enemies are in this world and this includes people from" – Chad leans over almost screaming in Fatima's ear – "IRAQ! Bam! Kerplooeey! They'll be history. That'll be AMERICAN history, yeah." Then he takes a deep breath and says quietly, "I am like my dad. I am my father's son. Don't forget that."

By now, everyone has turned their heads at the freak show and are laughing. Chad doesn't care what people think and continues with Fatima: "Here's my dad's list: Buzz cut blonde hair. Check. Helmet with netting. Check. Spotted camouflage shirt. Check. Bullet proof flack jacket with a lot of small pockets for grenades, a sling of bullets across the chest, a knife in a sheath hanging from belt, and an M-16. Check. Pants that puff into black army boots. Check. Backpack with porn magazine and a picture of me and Nick in camping gear and some clean socks and k-rations with real beef. Check."

Someone pipes up and calls Chad a weirdo and Fatima his girlfriend.

"Go fuck yourself!" Chad barks.

Terrence the Jock comes up to him, "Your father is not in the army, he couldn't shoot a pigeon with a b-b-gun stuck in its ass." Fatima gives a flick of alarm when she hears the word "shoot."

Chad scrambles to his feet. "Not only can my dad shoot, but I've inherited that trait, asshole!"

A big argument of boy butting, shoving, desks kicked by gigantic angry tennis shoes. A dog fight of shouting listing all the things you can sodomize. Girls' voices squeal to stop it; they warn about hall guards and crack up into general law-and-order giggling.

When Mr. Matthews enters the classroom, the fight collapses, but not completely. Terrence and Chad crash back on their seats. Chad is breathing hard and scribbles on a drawing in an open notebook. I peer over and see he's drawn pictures of exploding heads with bits of brains flying everywhere, except the bits of brains looked like butterflies and he has scrawled red ink BLOOD READY. TOMORROW SAME TIME, SAME PLACE. Then Chad starts writing something, just writing and writing. Finally I say to him, "What crazy

thing are you writing?" He says, "the true story of the Civil War."

After class, Mr. Matthews pulls me aside and said, "Gillian, what is going on back there?" But when Mr. Matthews asked for a simple answer to a complicated question, I freeze. He is saying to the effect: "Gillian. You get A's. You can stop him. You can save us from destruction." Part of me has this morbid curiosity. What will happen if I just let things run its course? Will Chad destroy the world or continue with his usual bullshit? Maybe Chad really does like Fatima but can't express love, or maybe, with luck, jocks will explode from their own hot air. Part of me wants to email my brother Scott, "I could bear it. I didn't run away from danger, I faced down my enemy. I am as good as you."

But I panic. I run. Instead, I lie. I tell Mr. Matthews that Chad hates Civil War videos when he forgets his meds.

#####

I decide I will warn Fatima about Chad. She doesn't know people here, and maybe she can't tell when people are kidding and when they are serious. The least I can do is try and explain what goes on in the weirdo section of a classroom. Fatima works at the High Plains Corner Mart. On the roof, the Mart flies an American flag so big, the building looks like a post office. Foggy refrigerators hum with beer and energy drinks. The store is also stocked with corn flakes and animal crackers and jerky sticks and porn magazines wrapped in the kind of plastic that wraps American cheese slices. Fatima is at the counter doing her homework with a stubby pencil. She recognizes me but doesn't speak. She has that placid mini-mart-cashier kind of look.

I come up to the counter, trying to figure out how to warn her without coming across as the same kind of lunatic as Chad. I could say: "Chad is crazy," or "don't believe anything

he says,” or “run for your life,” though all of these warnings make me sound like the kind of crazy person who does false alarms that they’ve planted a bomb somewhere.

Just then, someone who looks like Fatima’s father comes out. He wears a white shirt with rolled up sleeves and has tough looking arms. His black hair is curly and his voice is loud and jokey. He sees my heavy backpack and practically cheers: “You look like an A student! Yes, you do. Look Fatima, an A student.” Then he goes on about me helping Fatima with her homework. “I know they have homework groups in American schools,” he says as if he’s been studying us for ages.

Fatima looks at me sullenly.

“I’m not such a good student,” I say, wishing he would leave because if I warned them now about Chad’s threats, he would say: “What kind of an A student are you? What is in your backpack if not books? A bomb?” He

tells me he is Fatima’s uncle, not her father. He is more modern and that is why he has a store and lets Fatima not wear her scarf. “We want Fatima to feel like an American, and if that means not wearing her hijab, then fine. We can sacrifice a little. Besides Fatima loves school here,” he says and on and on he goes about how he loves this country and love-it-or-leave-it and all these things he must have memorized. Then he reaches into the drawer that usually has the gun but instead pulls out two human-hair braids and shows me. They are long and black. “Can you believe it,” he said, “this was Fatima’s beautiful hair. She cut them off like – poof! Her beautiful long hair! Some things are hard to accept, no?”

I stare at him. If he’s this upset about her hair, imagine what he’d say if I told him Chad threatened to shoot up the school. Fatima and her uncle both look at me, waiting for me to respond. I want to be like my brother Scott who faces danger, who in his first email wrote: the people

here hate us, but we're not leaving even if they
shoot because we're here to protect them. But
this is about school and what happens in school
just seems so unimportant in comparison.
I'm treading on Mars all red and vast and not
knowing what lies beneath the iron sand. I could
tell them: "Mars is radioactive and will fall to the
earth and kill us all," or "Mars does have green
men on it," or "Mars is just a planet. That's all."

#####

That night, dread hits me and I remove
my eye from the telescope. What did people
do in the old days when they could predict the
future by looking at the stars and saw the future
all frightening? I force myself to look again. I
should be doing my Civil War homework as now
we are in the Reconstruction period, but frankly,
I'd rather sit out at night and watch Orion
through my telescope, before he is chased from
the winter sky by Scorpio, supposedly sent to
sting his heel by his pissed-off ex-lover Artemis.

Orion was a giant hunter and so tall he
could walk on the bottom of the ocean and still
hold his face out of the water. He killed all
the animals on the island of Chios because he
couldn't get the woman of his dreams. Then he
raped her anyway and her father blinded him in
revenge. Then Orion went to an oracle, got his
sight back, only to be killed by Artemis because
he touched her inappropriately on a hunting
trip. I think he tried to rape one of her goddess
friends, too. I can't remember. He had quite
a rap sheet. But Orion was put up in the sky
where he doesn't have to worry about anything
anymore, and can just float in the sky like a
blithering idiot with his hunting dog Sirius.
There is some legend about Orion being torn
apart by dogs, but maybe that's just me being
paranoid. Some people feel that stars still have
power over the future, even though scientifically,
they don't. I don't know what to believe.

Last night, Chucho and Biggs staged a

dog fight. It was up in the mountains but my dad is a cop, and he was there and told me all about it. Tons of people were there, even from the school. Some of the dogs broke out of the ring and bit people. It was total chaos. The cops broke the place up but the dogs escaped and now no one knows where they are. It's too much: the dog fight, Chad drawing people with exploding heads and threatening disaster. The stress has made my hands into eczema claws.

I cut school. I tell my mother before she leaves for work, "I'm not feeling well, I want to stay home." She knows I'm not quite telling the truth but she says, "okay." I look out the window of our trailer toward school but I can't see it. I can see where it would be, if I had x-ray vision. I hear dogs in the distance. A quote comes to mind, "unleash the dogs of war." I don't remember where I read that, but I think Shakespeare wrote it about some war in the past.

I imagine Chad shooting up the school. It

is so real in my head, that I almost call my father the cop, "There is a shooting at that school," and he saying, "you're a fine one Gillian, playing hooky." I imagine Chad with two guns, ripping apart Mr. Matthew's history class. I imagine students running, ducking, blood making red daisies on the wall. I imagine Fatima fleeing, bolting through the doors and into the desert, thinking that she escaped and is free. I imagine reporters coming to school the next day, asking me why shootings happen and what is the problem with the Youth Of Today. "Had you seen any signs something was up?" a reporter would ask me. "Yes," I'd say, "it was in the stars."

I run to my computer to type a message to my brother Scott and write: If you don't run from danger, how do you face it? If it's natural to run from danger, then is being a coward natural? If you don't run but stay, can you stop people from shooting?

I press "send" and the row of green dots

zips quickly like a green thermometer reaching
the boiling point as the message tumbles to
Iraq. Then I put my head on my arms. I wish it
was night and I could set up my telescope. Then
everyone would be safe. My father, a Vietnam
vet, told me once that sometimes in war, a
soldier will run. They won't brag about it of
course. And perhaps no one will know. There is
so much going on, everyone just wants to save
their lives, he says. But running away never
makes them feel safe. War is in their brain and
never goes away. War just never goes away once
you've been in it.

*

SIMON PERCHIK

This dishwasher –why not! cold
flowing backward will be clean again
though you rinse the cup

upside-down, slowly, wallowing
and since you are left handed
you have to reach across

till your skin tightens, grows
scales and once on shore
your jaws flatten, consoled

that the dead are drinking instead
are already flowers and each evening
becomes one more grateful hillside

waiting for rain the way all dirt
holds back the dead as riverbanks
–it makes sense! inside this sink

an overpowering thirst for under
–what you call daylight
was once eternal rain

and night after night you wash
this same cup, over and over
to start a simple fire.